



Marilyn Zurmuehlen Working Papers in Art Education

Volume 13

pps. 13-19
DOI: 10.17077/2326-7070.1268

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Recommended Citation

Chen, Li-Tsu. "A Critical Examination of Cultural Influences on Children's Drawings From Mid-western United States and Taiwan." *Marilyn Zurmuehlen Working Papers in Art Education* 13 (1995): 13-19.

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A Critical Examination of Cultural Influences on Children's Drawings From Mid-western United States and Taiwan

Li-Tsu Chen

Introduction

Background of the Inquiry Problem

Many art education researchers have argued that children's art development is not predetermined solely by genetic factors, nor is it a culture-free phenomenon. They have attempted to find evidence of external and cultural influences on children's delineation of graphemes and graphic configurations through both within-cultural and cross-cultural comparisons (Wilson, 1985; Wilson & Wilson, 1979, 1982, 1983, 1984). It is still debatable, however, whether young children's drawings illustrate apparent cross-cultural differences. Krampen (1984) provided evidence, through cross-cultural comparisons, that Olivier's finding of 30 graphemes applied in children's drawings is validated universally. Other researchers (Dennis, 1966; Carothers & Gardner, 1979; Brittain, 1990) have claimed that cultural differences are apparent in older children's drawings only when they include more environmental influences. On the contrary, some researchers such as Alland (1983) and Wilson (1985) insist that children's drawings are different across cultures and cultural influences are observable in children's drawings right after they leave the scribbling stage.

Statement of the Problem

Discrepancies between claims about apparent cross-cultural differences and universal patterns in children's drawings have created confusion and misunderstandings. Unfortunately, not many cross-cultural studies have been done to detect and describe cultural influences on children's graphic development or cross-cultural differences among children's graphic schemas through effective comparisons. Even though a few studies have been conducted within-culture and cross-culture comparisons, there are many other cultures left unexamined and the graphic symbolic realms of students within them are ambiguous or unknown to us.

Purposes

This study was designed to clarify relationships between cultural factors and child graphic development by means of examining the

differences and similarities of graphic elements and formula in children's drawings from the Mid-Western United States and Taiwan.

Literature Review

There are a variety of graphic solutions in children's manipulation of graphic units, but children's drawings look not only consistent but also rather predictable. Freeman (1980) said, "children's drawings often look stereotyped" (p.19). Sets of canonical forms or graphemes can always be identified as dominating in children's drawings (Markham, 1964). Why could these uniform graphic features and predictable patterns appear commonly in children's drawings? How can these canonical forms or graphemes be widely adopted and applied by children? Theoretical arguments between universalists and relativists are, therefore, important.

For Kellogg (1970), children's graphic formulae are evolved from their scribbling, markings, and formations, in which they perceive shapes, patterns, and forms for later practice of more advanced combination of shapes and representation of images. Kellogg proclaimed that, "the development of child art is independent of associations and social environments" (p. 259).

Standing on the same base with the universalists, but at the opposite end from Kellogg, Golomb (1992) proclaimed that children's intention to make a visual likeness of real objects is the motivation and major force they use to seek better means and solutions to improve their drawings. What Golomb emphasized is that children modify and differentiate their graphic formula according to their perceptions of objects and their visual attributes.

Wilson & Wilson (1985, 1979, 1982, 1983, 1984) thought graphic symbol systems are very much like languages, containing basic elements and culturally defined meanings, structure, and composition. Children's development in drawing is a process of learning and adapting to the culture-specific graphic languages which are invented and utilized by adults. These adult graphic models are passed through many channels such as comics, mass media, films, and peer influences. Adult graphic models help children reform their simple undeveloped graphic formula to create better drawings.

Research Hypotheses

This study is constructed to investigate the following research hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: It will be possible to detect and classify culturally influenced differences in children's drawings created in Taiwan and in the United States.

Hypothesis 2: Every culture develops its own graphic formulas, which are more or less different from each other. The graphic formulas applied by United States and Taiwanese students therefore will differ too. Each group of students have preferences for using certain particular motifs for houses and running persons, depicting certain games for playing activities, and developing certain themes and subjects for fantasy world.

Hypothesis 3: There is a progressive order of developmental abilities in children's drawings across cultures, in the United States and Taiwan, that are correlated with children's handling of conventional forms and symbols.

Method

Population and Sample

The subjects were selected from children at grades 2, 4, 6, and 8 in the United States and Taiwan, two classes from each grade of four schools in Taiwan and four classes from each grade of schools in the Mid-Western United States. The following table designates the numbers of the children tested in each grade.

Table 1
Number of the children tested at each grade level

Grade	Taiwanese children	USA children
2	82	103
4	76	87
6	79	87
8	134	113
	341	310

The United States sample was from communities in the Midwest, such as Bloomington, Indiana; Omaha, Nebraska; and Toledo, Ohio. The taiwanese sample was from four schools in three different locations: Yung Ho Middle School in the outskirts of Taipei City, the National capital; Chien An Elementary School in a suburban city; Fong Tain Elementary School and Tain Wei Middle School in Tain Wei Village, a rural area in central Taiwan.

Instrumentation

This study used **Clark's-Drawing-Abilities-Test** in collecting children's drawings. The **Clark's-Drawing-Abilities-Test** has four items:

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(1) draw a house, (2) draw a person running very fast, (3) draw a group of friends playing on a playground, and (4) draw a fantasy world of your imagination.

Every test booklet contains one cover page for personal data, and four pages of drawing items. There are brief but clear directions for each task; for example, directions for the first drawing are, "In the rectangle below, draw a picture of an interesting house as if you were looking at it from across the street. Use a #2 pencil and allow yourself no more than 15 minutes" (Clark, 1989; Clark & Zimmerman, 1984). Test booklets for Taiwanese students were translated into Chinese by the author, so that most educated Taiwanese children could understand them.

Selection of the Clark's-Drawing-Abilities-Test

The **Clark's-Drawing-Abilities-Test** has been used to measure children's drawing abilities in general. In this study, however, it was used as a work-sample data collection device, gathering children's work-sample drawings means that all subjects drew the same subject matters in the same media. This facilitated comparative methods as means of analysis. The **Clark's-Drawing-Abilities-Test** was chosen because it possesses three characteristics considered beneficial and appropriate to the purposes of this study: (1) the activity of drawing with a pencil on paper is easy to administer and experienced by most children in both cultures; (2) the four drawing tasks appeal to those subject matters favored by a majority of children in various cultures; (3) its contents of four widely different drawing tasks provides a broad base for observations of children's drawing habits and children's perception of their environments and cultures.

Content Analysis of Data

Development of Categories for Analysis

Analysis of responses is divided into two major categories-- Mechanical Structural Elements and Thematic Emphasis Components (or Accessory Elements for item 1). Each category consists of subdivisions based on pictorial characteristics of the drawings. Because of the limit in length, only subcategories for item one are presented below:

Item 1: House

Mechanical structural elements (Graphic strategies)

1. Spatial arrangement

Pictorial depth: a. Size and position

b. Baseline

2. Use of shading/Tone and Value:

- a. Even/smooth
- b. Value/varied
- 3. Line quality: a. Line weight similar
- b. Line weight varied
- 4. Conventional forms and styles
 - a. Structural forms for house
 - b. Roof styles
 - c. Smoke shapes
 - d. Window styles
 - e. Door styles
 - f. Texture patterns for roof
 - g. Patterns for wall
 - h. Chimney styles
- 5. Accessory: a. Wall decoration
- b. Roof decoration

Environmental or Accessory Components

- 1. Cultural features: customs, traditional symbols
- 2. Inclusion of front or back yard
- 3. Inclusion of fence

Comparison of the categories of representational features of children's drawings from two different cultures will be based on basic statistical techniques. By means of coding each comparative item with numbers, as percentages, the search for culture-common drawing habits and tendencies will be facilitated. Simply to list different or similar aspects of children's drawings by two cultural groups through cross-cultural comparison, however, is not the end of this study. Expressions of interpretation also will be presented to make the numerical differences more meaningful and understandable.

Anticipated Results

Findings of a pilot study illustrated evidence of differences in children's depiction of house styles and decoration: facial features, profile, clothing, and games, as well as in manipulation of lines, pictorial space, and compositional techniques. Culture-common or culture-related events, symbols, and designs are reflected in children's drawings. It was ascertained that children's drawings reflect their perceptions of, and participation in, their environments, societies, and cultures.

Similarities in many aspects of graphic representations in these four drawing tasks across the Mid-western United States and Taiwanese groups also were found. They are especially obvious when children do not include too many details or oversimplify their drawing motifs. Contour drawings or schematic shapes for human or houses are applied often, but shadings and three-dimensional forms are hardly indicated, especially among younger subjects in both cultural groups.

As revealed from findings of the pilot study and review of other research, it seems that both universal and cultural factors interact throughout the entire process of graphic development. The large number of drawing samples analyzed in this study will make differences or similarities more obvious across the four selected grades and two cultures.

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